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## Road Construction and Trail Improvement in Laos during 1965

### Summary

The greatest construction effort in Laos during 1965 occurred in south-eastern Laos where over 300 miles of road and 150 miles of improved trails were added to the existing supply routes from North to South Vietnam. Through truck traffic is now possible, in dry weather from Mu Gia Pass on route 12 at the Laos/North Vietnam border to the Laotian border adjacent to Thua Thien, Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces of South Vietnam. Much of the new road network is an expansion and upgrading of the existing trail system. The possibility of interdicting the supply routes in Laos used by the North Vietnamese is made considerably more difficult with the addition of these alternate routes in the system. Communist construction cadres and locally conscripted labor moreover, continue to rapidly repair bomb damage to roads, fords, and bridges.

1. In Laos a truckable route is any road or trail wide enough to accommodate USSR designed trucks (7-8 feet wide) during the dry season unless photography shows it to be overgrown and in disuse. During the monsoon, supply routes are barely passable because heavy rains cause the road surfaces to deteriorate rapidly. Aerial photography however, has shown vehicles or vehicular tracks on these roads during this season. All the new roads, average 12-15 feet in width and have a natural earth surface. In places where drainage is poor, they have been corduroyed (with logs) or surfaced with loose gravel and are comparable to logging roads in the US. Improvements on trails, usually averaging 6-8 feet in width, include realignment, and leveling the surface of rutted sections with fill. Bridges on both roads and trails, where they exist, are timber structures but most streams are forded. The foot trail through the Demilitarized Zone into Laos, a known personnel infiltration route, has more elaborate improvements with many new narrow bridges over streams and hand rails along its steeper grades.

2. The supply route system has been increased mainly by the addition of roads extending eastward from a main north/south artery to a system of trails that continue into South Vietnam. Routes 92 and 96, the main north/south arteries, stretch south for 140 miles from Huong Hing. At least 4 roads extend east from these 2 routes. The only major road construction not in this system is route 91-911 which is an alternate to route 23 extending from 23 to route 9 just west of Tchepone. The length of each segment of new or improved road is as follows:



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<u>Route</u>	<u>Length (in statute miles)</u>
911	64
North/South Arteries	
92 (South from Muong Hong)	77
96	64
Eastward Connectors	
922	17
923	3
165 (Chavane to border trails)	34
Chavane - Route 16 (Partially trails)*	40
16 (Attapeu to border)	46

The length of improved trails at the Laos/Vietnam border are as follows:

<u>Location</u>	<u>Length (in statute miles)</u>
DMZ	35
Route 91 - DMZ	15
East of 922	8
East of 923	10
East and South of 165	85

3. Labor and materials for road construction in the Laos peninsula are all procured locally making these roads inexpensive to build and maintain. The Communists conscript local labor for work, both on new roads and the repair of bomb damage, but they are augmented by engineering troops in some areas. Furthermore local labor is experienced in this type of construction enabling them to build or repair roads quickly. Work is done with hand tools but trucks were seen in use to haul gravel or laterite for road surfacing on parts of routes 911 and 92. Aerial photography revealed very few pieces of mechanized roadbuilding equipment on any of the road construction in southeastern Laos. It is estimated that 200 men with 5 trucks could build 1 mile of road in one week. The labor requirement without trucks for the same rate of construction would at least double.

4. Besides new road construction, the Communists made continuous efforts during 1965 to keep the roads, checkpoints, bridges and trails open by repairing bomb damage and improvement of the existing network. Bridges destroyed by bombings on the northern part of route 92 in July at Co TIE [redacted] and Temple [redacted] were repaired in about a month. During December coolies were seen repairing bomb damage along route 12 west of the

\* Clearing operations and widening of the trail portion was observed in December 1965 photography.

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junction with route 23. They also rebuilt bridges along route 23 north of its junction with route 911 during September and October. Similarly, the Laos/North Vietnam border crossings at routes 6, 7, and 8 are continually repaired after bomb damage. Communist truck traffic continues on route 12 through the Mu Gia Pass although this chokepoint is bombed regularly. It has been closed intermittently but post strike photography continues to show vehicle tracks weaving in and out of the bomb craters.

5. Reports from the Mu Gia Pass vicinity claim that two newly constructed bypasses exist both north and south of this chokepoint but neither has been verified by aerial photography. The southern route reportedly extends east to the border from route 23 through the village of Ban Koonne [REDACTED] whereas the northern route extends from route 15 in North Vietnam into the Ban Teung [REDACTED] area of Laos. Photography of 2 and 19 December show a possible bypass to Mu Gia in Laos parallel to route 12 and within 2 km of it to the east. The proximity of this bypass to the Mu Gia Pass chokepoint however, makes it equally susceptible to periodic interdiction by aerial bombing.

6. The North Vietnamese apparently consider Mu Gia Pass the most important border crossing in their supply line south because of the rapid and continued restoration of bridges and fords along routes in North Vietnam leading to it. They continue to repair bomb damage and maintain route 15 between Vinh and Mu Gia Pass. A makeshift railroad using part of the abandoned Vinh-Dong Hoi line parallel to route 15 also is kept in operation.

7. Numerous examples have appeared in recent photography of considerable effort being exerted by the Communists to improve their system of supply routes to South Vietnam. The corduroying of swampy sections on routes 23/911 and the northern part of 92 in Laos show that the Communists are trying to use these roads the year round. Corduroying involves the surfacing of a road with bound and anchored saplings or logs, sometimes with a sand cover to give a smoother riding surface. On 18 miles of route 92 south from Ban Dong, new timber bridges and road realignment have been completed along with corduroying. A new timber bridge has been constructed on route 23 and over 3 miles of corduroy surface has been completed on 23 north of bridge. When new construction was first seen along route 911, corduroying was under way. Other areas along the supply route are undoubtedly also being upgraded to provide greater use of this road system.

8. The construction of alternate routes in Laos during 1965 will make interdiction by aerial bombing of the supply lines to South Vietnam considerably more difficult. Route 91-911 can act as an alternate to route 23 which previously was the only direct route south from 12 to 9 in eastern Laos. Short bypasses built along parts of 23 and 92 can act as alternates to the main route. Use of the Se Kong river for a supply line would be increased if sections of 92 and 96 are interdicted. Any of numerous trails at the Laos/South Vietnam border east of routes 922, 165, and 16 can be used as alternatives for porter traffic to the east.

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The points most susceptible to interdiction by aerial bombing will continue to be the bridges, checkpoints, truck parks, staging areas, and the storage areas. Destruction of any improvement work such as corduroying also will contribute to disruptions and the slowing down of supply movements. Truck parks and storage areas exist at the eastern end of each route extending to the South Vietnamese border. Regular bombing of these transloading and storage points would force the Communists to step up movements of supplies and create bottlenecks along the supply route. Besides the bombing of bridges along these roads, an emphasis upon the junctions where the roads extending east connect to the north/south roads would partly block trucks from getting to the transloading areas at the border. The North Vietnamese however, have shown great effort and determination to keep their lines of communication open and repairs along supply lines through Laos will undoubtedly be carried out with similar urgency.

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Attachment:

1. Map
2. Reproduced article

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